

Gurnet Lighthouse Relocation Under Way

The Gurnet Lighthouse sits on a platform in preparation for its move to the concrete foundation on the right.

Photo by Josh Cutler

By PAULA MAXWELL

An eroding cliff has forced the U.S. Coast Guard to begin relocation of historic Gurnet Light, the oldest wooden lighthouse in the country.

The 14-ton lighthouse constructed in 1843, was dangerously perched just 50 feet from the edge of a bluff overlooking Cape Cod Bay.

Last Friday, engineers hired by the U.S. Coast Guard began lifting the 20-ton structure off its foundation and on to a wooden platform with hydraulic lifts where it will be slowly rolled to its new home, a foundation 140 feet inland. There it will finally rest when crews complete the job later this week.

Elaine Nudd, a member of the Gurnet Saquish Assn. Board of Directors, owns one of only 54 cottages on the Gurnet and is one of only a dozen year round residents. For 19 years she has made the Gurnet her permanent home. Her lifetime attachment to the lighthouse is founded in childhood memories. Like many others she is happy to see Gurnet Light preserved.

"Many of us are third and fourth generations out here. Gurnet Light is like an old friend. When you see that light flashing somehow you know everything is all right. We feel blessed that the Coast Guard chose to spend the money to preserve it."

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Gurnet Lighthouse as it once stood before an eroding cliff forced the move.

In early July, engineers chose a Hingham contractor, Northern Construction, to move the lighthouse. D&K Building Movers of Scituate are the subcontractors.

After a meeting with the Gurnet homeowners in September Coast Guard officials successfully ironed out concerns.

The actual move was delayed when residents complained that the relocated beacon would be too close to their homes and that large trucks and equipment needed would damage the dirt roads leading to the lighthouse along the 5 mile fragile peninsula.

Residents also wanted to keep the lighthouse within the confines of the fortress known as Fort Andrew, dating back to the 1700's. The original plan would have moved the lighthouse about 200 feet to a spot in front of the entrance to the fort, an earthen garrison used by colonial troops during the Revolutionary War. The current plan keeps the lighthouse within the walls of the fort and farther from neighboring houses.

Nudd said the Coast Guard was "wonderful" in heeding resident concerns about the move, which has attracted more than a little curiosity in an area that cannot accommodate too much traffic.



Frank Tedesco stands beneath steel beams and lifts holding the historic Gurnet Lighthouse.

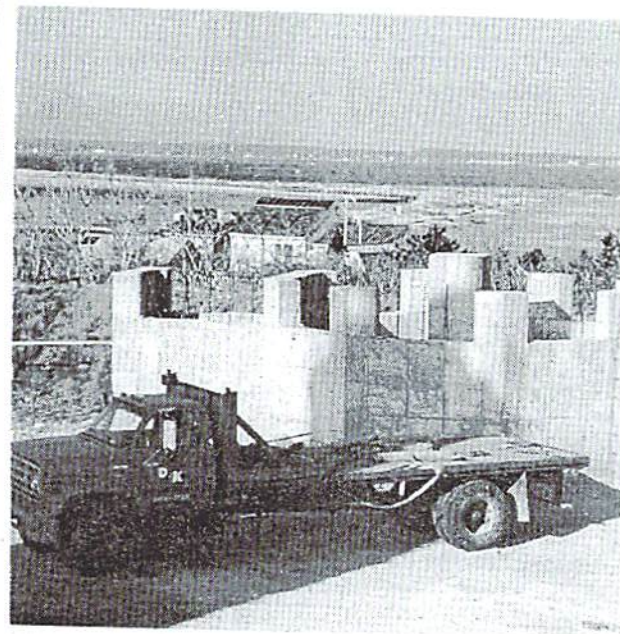
"We've had a steady stream of media people here this week including the Boston television stations. It's really something to see," said Duxbury resident Charles Delaney of the Coast Guard Auxiliary's Gurnet flotilla.

Rob Nelson of Northern Construction said crews felt lucky that warm weather prevailed for most of the prep work.

Gurnet Light, first built in 1768, was the first American beacon to have a system of 2 different "twin lights." It was completely destroyed by fire in 1801. A temporary single light was used until twin towers were completed in 1803. They were later rebuilt in 1843. Although the northeast tower was discontinued in 1924, the remaining tower is still used as a navigational aid flashing a white light.

While the move is under way a temporary flashing aid to navigation has been set up by the Coast Guard on the bluff overlooking the bay.

Wind and rain have eroded the 45-foot high cliff. If the lighthouse was not moved, Coast Guard engineers say a



D&K Building Movers of Scituate readies the new foundation for the transplanted lighthouse, 140 ft. inland.

hurricane or a strong northeast storm could have toppled it into the ocean.

One of the privately owned cottages near the lighthouse is dangerously perched about 3 feet from the edge of a cliff and will require a move of its own if it is to survive.

Because access is from Duxbury and the Gurnet is located in Plymouth, the move had to be approved by the conservation commissions in both towns and by the state historical commission.

Gurnet Light is made entirely of wood and is relatively small in size compared to many other lighthouses in the country. It will be the third lighthouse in Massachusetts to be moved in the last 2 years. In the summer of 1996, Highland Light in North Truro was moved 450 feet from the edge of a cliff because of erosion. Later that year Nauset Light in Eastham was moved 300 feet inland.

The Gurnet Project will cost about \$184,000. It cost \$1.7 million to move Highland Light.

Nelson said the Coast Guard considered airlifting the structure by helicopter but chose to move it on the ground and save \$80,000 in the process.